Women's Situation Rooms: Women Protecting Women's Voting Rights

Liberians celebrate the inauguration of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.
Liberia's 2011 election was the first to use a Women's Situation Room. (©AP Images)

While Nigerians went to the polls in March 2015 for what would prove to be <u>historic elections</u>, 40 young people in Abuja, mostly women, answered phones around the clock, fielding calls about outbreaks of violence and voter suppression.

Meanwhile, 300 female <u>election monitors</u> observed polls in 10 targeted Nigerian states, reporting irregularities back to Abuja. There, a team of eight eminent women from Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Senegal worked with political parties and religious groups to address threats of violence against women voters and women candidates as they happened.

Welcome to the Women's Situation Room. Nigeria's election was the most recent African election to benefit from a four-year-old idea that's been spreading throughout the continent. Originated during the 2011 presidential and legislative elections in Liberia to promote women's leadership development, the Women's Situation Room model has been replicated in Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mali and Guinea-Bissau.

Participants in Nigeria's Women's Situation Room during the March 2015 elections. (Courtesy U.S. Embassy Nigeria)

Studies show that women and children are the most likely to be affected by election violence, including efforts to prevent women from exercising their right to vote. Women's Situation Rooms employ women and youth to ensure access to the polls.

Among the desks in Nigeria's Women's Situation Room was one staffed with police representatives and another with representatives from Nigeria's Independent Electoral Commission, allowing immediate response to outbreaks of violence and incidents of voter exclusion.

"If a situation happens in the field and we want answers from the police — like violence erupted in a certain state while [women] were taking part in the election — we respond by finding the particular arm of government, INEC or police, to tackle the situation. If they're in the room, it's of course easier and faster," Turrie Akerele Ismael, Nigeria's solicitor-general and one of the situation room's eminent women, reported to U.N. Women.

"Women and youth play an active role in sustaining peace before, during and after the elections," said Sylvie Ndongmo of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which coordinated the Women's Situation Room for the Nigerian election. When civic groups work with governmental agencies to reduce threats to voters and candidates, said Ndongmo, "the threat of electoral violence becomes an opportunity for promoting sustainable peace and democracy."

